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ABSTRACT

Results of a study to determine preservice teachers' perception and understanding of social studies are examined. Fourteen undergraduate students who had completed student teaching were interviewed. Results indicated that students were confused about the nature of the field. The data showed the continuing domination of the field by history--most students majored in history, taught it during student teaching, and perceived it as the subject most likely to be taught and of primary importance in social studies. Respondents did not seem sure of their answers concerning social studies definition, purpose, and content. Some held the primary purpose to be indoctrination, the content to be history, and the definition to include social sciences, issues, and human interaction. Others considered the purpose to inspire critical thinking, the content to be history, and the definition to be humans and the environment. No respondents indicated social action, social criticism, or personal development as purpose, content, or definition. In addition, respondents did not indicate familiarity with the literature in the field. The study raises a number of questions concerning teacher education, curriculum, teaching decisions, and the long term effect of this confusion on teaching. (Author/KC)

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PRE-SERVICE TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL EDUCATION

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PRE-SERVICE TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

In a recently published analysis of the field of social studies, Barr, Barth and Shermis (1977) noted that there was confusion about the nature and definition of the field. They suggested that this is especially difficult for beginning teachers:

> For twelve years, during his or her public school education, the beginning teacher has been exposed to the content and objectives of social studies. Following graduation, the student has experienced four or five years of study in history and the social sciences, courses in social studies methods, and a semester of student teaching.
>
> After 16 years, it ought to be reasonable to expect that beginning teachers would have a fairly clear professional identity and know what the social studies is. (Barr, Barth & Shermis, 1977, p. 3)

The confusion among beginning teachers is not documented, though one can assume that the authors write out of their own experience. A similar concern about the lack of rationale-development focus in the preparation of social studies teachers is expressed by Shaver (1977, p. 97).

Other authors have approached the question of field definition recently (Brubaker, 1967; Brubaker, Simon and Williams, 1977; Jarolimek, 1977; Shaver, Davis & Helburn, 1979; Gross, 1977; Morrissett, 1977). The approaches vary from analytic frameworks (Brubaker, et al., 1977) to field reports from differing sections of the country (Jarolinek, 1977; Gross, 1977), but the theme remains that the field lacks cohesion and agreement, and does not provide beginning teachers with a clear and well articulated sense of its definition.

Every field of study undergoes periodic reassessment of its purposes, rationale and definition. Sometimes these occur as a result of new discoveries which threaten the sets of principles which undergird existing ideas about the field. In the

sciences, as Kuhn (1970) suggests, crises or dramatic shifts in paradigms which organize thought and research in a field may call for reassessment of the nature of the field.

A second basis for reassessment and redefinition occurs when analysis points out internal contradictions, confusions or grounds for a new field. This is exemplified by the emergence of such areas as cybernetics or sociobiology.

A third form of redefinition results from internal debate over a fundamental issue, as illustrated by the apparent division between experimental and clinical psychology, which may create splits that demand separable definitions.

A fourth cause of redefinition movements appears to be the result of groping for cohesion or suffering from feelings of inferiority and lack of direction. History, after suffering indignities by intrusion of the newer social sciences into domains presumed covered, has reasserted its absorptive powers by branching and incorporating methods and ideas from statistics and the social sciences in areas like cliometrics. History, as much as any field, undergoes cycles of reassessment and redefinition.

Currently, social education is in the midst of redefinition. The causes of this examination of rationales, basic principles, traditions and purposes of social education may be diverse but appear to fall mainly into the fourth category described above. There may have been some new discoveries about the field arising from the extensive activity of the 1960's, but none of these is especially clear or dramatic. Certainly no new framework for explanation or theory arose; critical thinking, inquiry, social scientific data, structure of disciplines and similar organizing themes had been expressed and advocated for decades prior to 1960.

Secondly, although contradictions and confusions abound in social education, these apparently did not fuel the current reassessment of the field. On the third possibility, a corollary of the second, the evident splits in social education, e.g.,

history vs. social science; disciplines vs. social issues; content vs. process; indoctrination vs. critical thinking, have existed openly in debate since the earliest days of the field and are not resolved in the redefinition now underway. Most contemporary writers on redefinition provide descriptions of these splits, but do not propose dividing or absorbing.

The redefinition movement in social education appears to derive from attempts to overcome the malaise and alienation which has overtaken the field. It seems partly to stem from feelings of inferiority as social education is threatened as an irrelevant frill or significantly less important than reading, math and related skills. The field lacks cohesion and clarity, but that has always been the case.

Redefinition is an important and valuable activity in any field. Although come current writers (Morrisett, 1979) argue that redefinition is, in the main, a waste of time and energy, there are good reasons for reconsidering rationales and traditions. Among those reasons are the following: to provide a contemporary forum for students of the field to explore old and new issues; to attempt a synthesis or a refined and more sophisticated basis for the field; to influence decision-makers about the vitality of the field; and to assist in the development of professional and theoretical interests among new initiates into the field.

PROBLEM

This paper is concerned with aspects of the last reason noted. It is an exploration of the definitional perceptions of undergraduate students preparing to become teachers of social studies. The major question examined is what are the perceptions of the field of social studies held by pre-service students.

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of undergraduate students who have completed student teaching in social studies at the New Brunswick Campus of Rutgers University during 1977-78 and 1978-79. During 1977-78, the sample consisted of 14 of 15 graduating seniors.

For 1978-79 the sample consisted of all 12 graduating seniors.

METHOD

This is an interview study. All students who met the conditions of the sample were asked to volunteer for interviews. An interview schedule was developed and refined. Two interviewers, using the schedule, interviewed respondents. Interviews were taped and transcribed.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited to a small sample from one university. With the exception of two respondents who did not participate, the respondents included all persons who had completed student teaching in social studies at Rutgers in New Brunswick, New Jersey, during the two year period 1977-79.

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

Data from interviews differ from data from some forms of questionnaires if interviews permit widely divergent responses and probing. This results in difficulties in providing summarizations from interviews since summarizations in tabular form require that individual responses be categorized.

The following tables incorporate such data, drawn from interviews and categorized. In addition, typical or particularly interesting quotes from respondents are included in the findings.

Table One shows some general characteristics of the sample for each year (1978 and 1979) data were obtained. In each year the predominant undergraduate major was history. Males are represented at almost twice the number of females. The course most often taught during student teaching was history with a scattering of other courses as second assignments (e.g., Latin America, world culture, American studies). Respondents student taught in grades 7-9 and grades 10-12 in approximately equal numbers.

TABLE ONE

Characteristics of Sample (1978, 1979)

Major	Sex M	Sex F	Courses Taught* Hist	Govt	Geo	Psych	Soc.St.	Other	Grades Taught 7-9	Grades Taught 10/12
History										
1978	9	3	10		1	2	3	6	5	9
1979	7	4	10	1		1		4	7	5
Social Studies										
1978		2	1			1				2
1979	1		1							1
Totals	17	9	22	1	1	4	3	10	12	17

N=26; 1978 Ss=14, 1979 Ss=12

*Assignments often included more than one course per student.

Table Two indicates the political self-identification of respondents by sex. There is a broad distribution with higher proportions self-identified as liberal and middle of the road.

TABLE TWO

Political Self-Identification by Sex (1978, 1979)

Political Self-Identification	Sex: Male 1978	Male 1979	Female 1978	Female 1979	Totals No.	Totals %
Radical	0	1	0	0	1	3.85
Left	0	3	0	0	3	11.5
Liberal	4	1	1	3	9	34.6
Middle	3	1	3	1	8	30.8
Conservative	2	2	0	0	4	15.4
Apolitical	0	0	1	0	1	3.85
					26	100 %

Table Three provides a comparison of respondent data regarding major and political self-identification and perceptions of the primary content of social studies History is identified as the primary content by over 60% of the respondents. The category "other" included such responses as:

"I'm not sure."

"Anything that deals with people living together in society."

"The way people live."

"Not historical facts."

These responses are to questions and probes asking respondents to identify the primary content they belive constitutes social studies. Responses were categorized according to prominent views of content in social studies.

TABLE THREE

Major and Political Self-Identification by Primary Content 1978, 1979

Major/Politics	Primary Content									
	History		Soc.Sci.		Issues		Unknown		Other	
	1978	1979	1978	1979	1978	1979	1978	1979	1978	1979
History										
Radical										1
Left		1						1		
Liberal	3	4				1			1	
Middle	3	1				1			1	
Conservative	2	1	1							
Social Studies										
Apolitical									1	
Middle	1									
Conservative		1								
Year Subtotals	8	8	1		2			1	3	3
Totals	16		1		2		1		6	
% of total	61%		4%		8%		4%		23%	

1978 N = 14

1979 N = 12

Combined N = 26

Table Four shows major subject and political self-identification of respondent according to respondent's definition of the field. Definitions varied across the same and from the primary content identified as shown in Table Three. The category "other" in Table Four included such responses as:

"Study of man in his environment."

"Anything that is not English, math, chemistry and stuff like that."

"I don't know. It encroaches on so many areas, it's easier to talk about things that aren't social studies."

"Liberal arts--not music, science or literature."

"I don't think anyone can define it."

"Social studies has no definition."

"It is a study of people."

It should be noted that most respondents appeared puzzled by the question on definition, and many had long pauses to formulate responses. Self-identified political orientation appeared to have no bearing on field definition, although the sample size is too small to provide adequate statistics for analysis of this point.

TABLE FOUR

Major and Political Self-Identification by Definition 1978, 1979

Major/	Definition: History		Social Sci.		Issues		Process		Other	
Politics	1978	1979	1978	1979	1978	1979	1978	1979	1978	1979
History										
Radical										1
Left										3
Liberal	1	1	1		1			1	3	1
Middle	1	2					2		2	
Conservative	2	1								
Social Studies										
Apolitical							1			
Middle Conservative							1			
Year Subtotals	4	4	1		1		4	1	5	6
Totals	8		1		1		5		11	
% of Total	31%		4%		9%		19%		42%	

1978 N=14 1979 N=12 Combined N=26

Table Five indicates respondent definitions of the field according to the respondent's perceptions of primary purposes for teaching social studies. Respondents identified indoctrination as a primary purpose with such responses as:

"To educate or innoculate American kids with American values."

"Don't break the rules, don't rebel, stay conservative."

"Teaching American ideals."

"It's dictated by the school."

Respondents did not indicate that they agreed with these purposes; only that they appeared to be primary. No respondents identified social action as a primary purpose.

Respondents were asked questions with probes around the direct question, "How do you define social studies?", and the direct question, "What do you consider to be the primary purpose of your teaching social studies?"

Table Six shows respondent definitions according to the source of those definitions. Major field (e.g., history classes) course work and methods classes were important sources of definitions. Student teaching appeared to be a location for refining or rethinking a definition. The source category "other" included such responses as:

"I just made it up."

"General experience at Rutgers."

"Mainly education courses, some from history, it's mixed."

"From experience and reading."

"Just my understanding."

"A feeling."

Respondents were asked to identify the source of definitions. Probes were used to cause respondent consideration of personal experience as a student in elementary and secondary schools, as a college student, in student teaching, through readings or other sources.

TABLE FIVE
Definitions by Purpose for Social Studies, 1978, 1979

Definition	Primary Purpose* Indoct. 1978	1979	Social 1978	1979	Cit. 1978	1979	Disc.Info. 1978	1979	Dec.-Mkg. 1978	1979	Crit. Th. 1978	1979	Action 1978	1979
History	2	1	2					1		1		1		
Social Sciences							1							
Issues						1								
Thinking Process									3		1	1		
Other	2	2		1	2	1		1	1			1		
Year Subtotals	4	3	2	1	2	2	1	2	4	1	1	3	0	0
Totals	7		3		4		3		5		4		0	
% of Totals	27%		12%		15%		12%		19%		15%		0	

*Key: Indoct.=Indoctrination
Social = Socialization
Cit. = Citizenship
Disc.Info.=Discipline Information
Dec.Mk. = Decision-Making
Crit.Th. = Critical Thinking
Action = Social Action

1978 N= 14
1979 N= 12
Combined N = 26

TABLE SIX

Definition by Source of Definition 1978, 1979

	Source							
	Major		Methods		Stud.Tch.		Other	
Definition	1978	1979	1978	1979	1978	1979	1978	1979
History	3	3		1	1			
Social Sciences					1			
Issues				1				
Thinking Process			1		2	1	3	
Other				3			3	3
Year Subtotals	3	3	1	5	4	1	6	3
Totals	6		6		5		9	
% of total	23%		23%		19%		35%	

1978 N = 14
1979 N = 12
Combined N = 26

Related, Non-Tabular Findings

Responses which illustrate the diversity of views of the field are as follows:

1. Male, history major, "liberal" self-identification.

   Expect to teach: "sociology, political science, that sort of thing."

   Purpose: "Teaching people how to live with each other."

   Content: "History"

2. Female, History, "Middle"

   Expect to teach: "history, geography, political science, international relations, economics"

   Purpose: "I think kids have to be aware of their heritage."

   Content: "History"

   Definition: "Well, it's not math and not humanities and English. It's not science, so I guess it's everything other than that."

3. Male, History, "Middle"

   Expect to teach: "in secondary school? They have social studies teachers in secondary school? I thought they had social studies teachers only in the junior high school."

   Content: "History:

4. Male, History "Conservative"

   Purpose: "I kinda think it's relating to yourself today."

   Content: "History"

5. Female, Social Studies "Apolitical"

   Expect to teach: "History, geography, sociology, mini-courses, women's studies, black studies."

   Purpose: "To get the student acquainted with his society; to explore; to get him interested in it; to explore social problems by using inquiry."

   Content: "Man in his society."

6. Male, History, "Middle"

   Expect to teach: "American History"

   Purpose: "where students can learn to think and to make a good decision."

These are examplic responses to questions and probes around the topics the respondent is expected to teach if employed in a school and what the primary purpose, content and definition of social studies were understood to be.

Discussion

Social education is an area of confusing definition and lack of clarity. Periodically, attempts to identify the nature, dimensions and content of the area are made as redefinition of the field has recently focused on traditions (Barr, Barth and Shermis, 1977; Brubaker, Simon and Williams, 1977) and criticisms of those traditions (Engle, Shirley; Fair, 1977).

There is both constancy and change in the practice and the literature of social education. History has long been the dominant subject, with government or civics and geography having major shares of curricular time (Gross, 1977). Arguments to alter social education to provide more social science work or more social issue orientation have been a recurring phenomena, and some practices have changed toward social science but the field is still heavily history. Arguments to shift the focus from subject disciplines to thinking or decision-making processes (Hunt and Metcalf, 1968, Engle, 1977) have occurred and are widely supported in the literature, but are not evident in practice.

Interviews reported in this paper indicate the confusion and the constancy in the field as perceived by pre-service undergraduates who have been prepared through the level of student teaching to become social studies teachers. One would expect a graduating student who plans a professional career to have some sense of the field in which the career is to be built.

Interview data show the continuing domination of the field by history, both in the selection of majors by students and in their perceptions of the primary content. Among respondents who identified content other than history, many used historical or cultural heritage statements to describe the purposes and definitions for the field. Students majored in history, taught history in student teaching and perceived it as the subject most likely to be taught and of primary importance in social studies.

Respondents, when asked to define the field, provided a variety of definitions with history as the most frequently noted but including a broad diversity that suggests confusion among them. Respondents did not perceive internal conflicts among their individual definitions of the field, its primary content and its primary purposes. Some held the primary purpose to be indoctrination, the content to be history and the definition to include social sciences, issues and human interaction. Others proposed the purpose of inspiring critical thinking, the content to be history and the definition to be humans and the environment. Respondents did not appear sure of their answers to definition, purpose and source questions, but were considerably more certain of their answers to

questions about what they might teach and the primary content.

Very few respondents indicated that the purposes, content or definition involved social issues, critical thinking, or decision-making. Among those who suggested such possibilities, they were often in the form of an afterthought or stated as a by-product of history teaching. No respondents indicated social action, social criticism, or personal development purposes, content or definition of the field.

In terms of sources, respondents did not indicate familiarity with the literature of the field. Course work and student teaching seemed to be the main sources, but not the readings involved in course work. This suggests that students get a sense of clarity or confusion in the field as a result of general experiences as they anticipate entry into the field, not so much as a result of intellectual confrontation with ideas of authorities through reading as through other means. Respondents did not generally identify a particular source for their definitions, and did not overtly recognize confusion or contradiction. There was, however, considerable evidence that respondents had not systematically considered divergent definitions, purposes and content.

The students interviewed were a very small segment of the total population of incoming social studies teachers across the country. They were, however, the total group for two years at the main campus of a major state university. There is no claim of generalizability from this study, but there are a number of concerns which it raises.

1. Is confusion about the nature of the field a positive or negative aspect of social education? Is it more or less than in other fields?

2. Should teacher education incorporate study of diverse definitions and rationales?

3. What influence does teacher perception of field definition have on curriculum and teaching decisions?

4. What are the long term effects of confusion among entering social studies teachers?

5. Are the respondents in this study similar to or different from other populations?

6. Are the arguments over definition carried on in the literature influential in the field?

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